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DEPARTMENT FOR NEA/ELA MGREGONIS

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TAGS: PGOV PREL PHUM JO

SUBJECT: JORDANIAN PARLIAMENTARY CANDIDATES ALREADY
JOCKEYING FOR UPCOMING ELECTIONS

Classified By: Ambassador R. Stephen Beecroft for Reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (S/NF) SUMMARY. With GOJ assurances that parliamentary elections will take place in the final quarter of 2010, prospective candidates have already started planning campaigns to enter the next legislature, despite current ambiguity about the content of the new electoral law. In separate meetings, two likely candidates expressed contempt for the extremely unpopular parliament dismissed in 2009, although both doubted that the new electoral law would bring procedural changes to improve the membership and function of this legislative body. In addition, the candidates discussed a series of topics, including the role of regional loyalties among Palestinian-origin Jordanian voters and the costs of running a campaign in Jordan. End Summary.

"Tribal" Politics...Palestinian Style

¶2. (S/NF) On January 21, PolOff and EconOff met with Wa'el al-Jaabari, a wealthy West Amman businessman of Palestinian descent who has never served in parliament, but is considering running in the upcoming elections. Al-Jaabari, along with virtually all contacts willing to discuss the upcoming elections, assumed that one of the most heavily criticized aspects of the current Jordanian electoral law, the one man-one vote system with multiple candidates, will remain virtually unchanged.

(NOTE: "One man-one vote" in a Jordanian context refers to a controversial provision under which each voter casts a vote for a single candidate within a district that elects multiple MPs from a longer list of candidates. Many analysts argue that this system magnifies family and tribal influence by:

 --pressuring voters to give their one vote to someone they know personally who can be petitioned for services or favors

 -- undermining political party development by encouraging candidates to base campaigns around their personal reputations, rather than a stated policy platform, and

 -- diluting citizens' voting power by only allowing them to vote for a small percentage of the total people who will represent their district. END NOTE.)

¶3. (S/NF) Forecasting his chances for victory under the current system, al-Jaabari has concluded that support from families originating from Hebron, his ancestral home, could potentially carry him to victory. He indicated that Jordanians of Palestinian descent tend to vote by these historical regional groupings, which often play a critical role in the races for seats traditionally held by Jordanians of Palestinian descent.

¶4. (S/NF) Al-Jaabari's frank comments indicate that regional background seems to play a similar role with Palestinian-origin electorates as the tribal affiliations do with East Bankers. Al-Jaabari, whose grandfather was an influential mayor of Hebron from 1948 to 1976 and was very close to late King Hussein, indicated that he would face two main hurdles in his bid for a seat in the new parliament: first, uniting his own large and sometimes fractious family behind his candidacy; and second, convincing the other prominent Hebron families not to field a candidate of their own. Indeed, he stated that if another significant Hebron candidate runs, "we will split the vote and have no chance at all." These issues will likely be settled in quiet family meetings over the coming weeks.

A Seasoned Politician Plans his Return

¶5. (S/NF) Former MP and International Visitor Program (IVP) participant Nasar al-Qaisi has a different set of concerns. Al-Qaisi is from a smaller and less influential East Bank family from the relatively wealthy Madaba area and he won his seat by virtue of an intensely disciplined and organized campaign he built around his contacts from his medical practice. Although his family consists of only around 300 members, he won his heavily populated district with more than 11,000 votes. His campaign in 2007 required the mobilization of thousands of paid volunteers, the staffing of sophisticated campaign headquarters in a secret location outside of his district, and the rental of more than 600 vehicles for election day, highlighting how expensive a proposition a parliamentary campaign can be. In the absence

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of an effective party structure, these costs are borne entirely by the candidate himself, and can easily run into hundreds of thousands of dollars. (NOTE: Prior to its dissolution, the salary for members of the lower chamber was about \$3,600 per month. END NOTE.) Unlike most of his colleagues, Qaisi also operates an efficient and well-funded constituent services office, largely out of his own pocket.

¶6. (S/NF) Al-Qaisi stated that he has heard little from the tight-lipped committee working on a new electoral law, despite the fact that it has met several times behind closed doors in recent weeks. Like Jaabari, Al-Qaisi also anticipates no change to the single vote system, but he says that his sources believe that the new system could entail a single vote for a single candidate in each district - but that these districts could consist of non-contiguous areas. Districts could then be drawn from multiple dispersed regions, a procedure that will likely produce accusations of gerrymandering. (Comment: In discussions with senior-level Jordanian contacts, the concept of non-contiguous districts has not been raised and appears to be an unlikely outcome in the new law. End Comment.)

¶7. (S/NF) Al-Qaisi stated that he was concerned about the timing of the election. With the PM's announcement that elections will take place toward the end of 2010, Al-Qaisi felt that the Islamic Action Front (IAF) and other Islamists would gain a considerable tactical advantage on the heels of the Eid al-Fitr holiday in mid-September. Al-Qaisi indicated that the Islamists had routinely used the mosques as nerve centers for their campaign efforts in the past, and that an election soon after Ramadan would enable Islamist candidates to make their final push with full coffers drawn from holiday mosque donations. He felt, however, that much of this benefit will have dissipated by December. In sum, he believes moderates would fare better with a later election date.

¶8. (S/NF) Al-Qaisi noted with concern the emergence in his district and elsewhere of what he considered a conservative "Salafi-like" group known as the "Tahriren," who are typically young men distinguished by conservative dress and

attitudes. Although these youth would likely deny the legitimacy of the electoral process, he predicted that they could, if galvanized, form a solid voting bloc for Islamist candidates. He estimated that there were perhaps 5-6,000 "Tahrireen" in his district alone. (NOTE: Post has little further information on these persons, although young men in conservative attire are common outside of West Amman. Other contacts have confirmed the existence of this grouping and stated that they are more of an informal movement of alienated Islamist youth rather than a structured organization. In other countries, however, "Tahrireen" can refer to supporters of the multinational Hizb al-Tahrir. This organization is banned in Jordan. END NOTE.)

¶9. (S/NF) COMMENT. Both men clearly believe that we will see more continuity than change in the new electoral law, and as a result, neither of them envision a significantly different election dynamic. They believe the current electoral system is likely to survive largely intact and they both underscore the tremendous personal expense candidates incur during the elections -- expenses that far exceed their official salaries as MPs. Both quietly voiced disapproval of the role of the security services in previous elections, but anticipated the services will play a similar role in the future. Even al-Qaisi, who was among the most progressive thinkers in the old parliament, sees little role for political parties and shares the common view that Jordanian politics has little to do with platforms or ideas and everything to do with patronage and the delivery of government services and largesse to one's own constituents. END COMMENT.

Beecroft